

Discrimination by Religion in Immigration to the US

Editorial

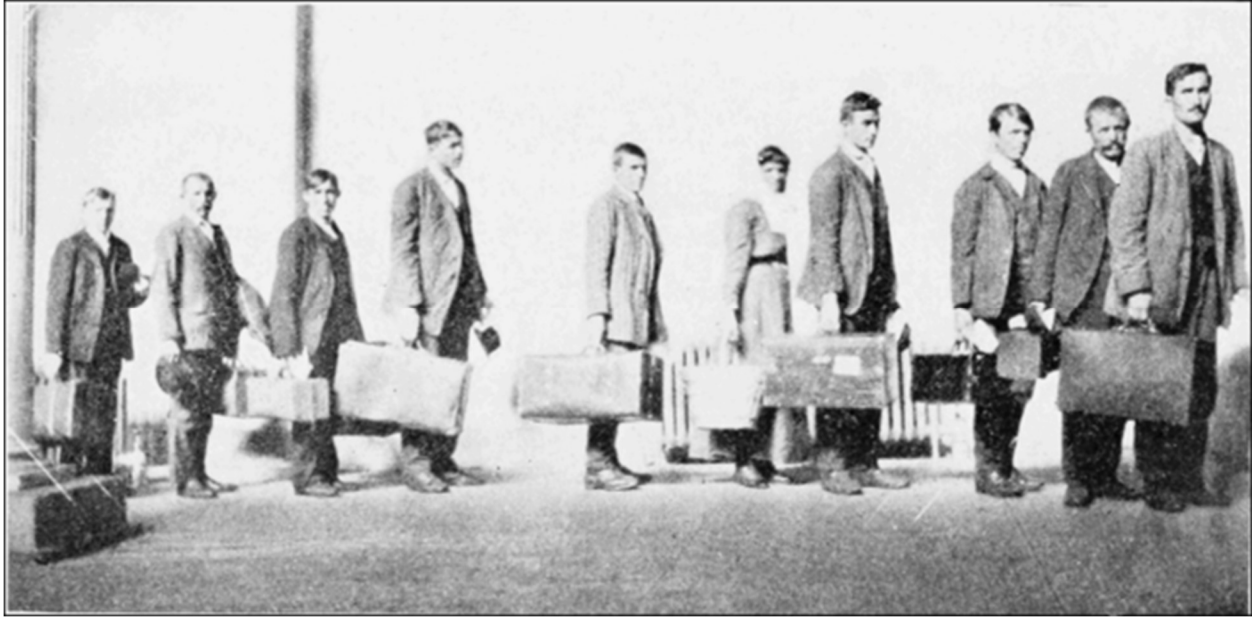
[Jett Rucker](#)

Presidential hopeful Donald Trump seems to have garnered a good deal of support from American voters with his offer to ban immigration to the US by Muslims. Immigration and religion have a history in the present territory of the United States that goes all the way back to the 16th Century.

The authorities in then-Spanish Florida discovered, around 1565, that a band of Protestants from France had settled on their (the Spaniards') side of the St. Johns River at Fort Caroline. The Spaniards duly attacked and captured Fort Caroline and then, except for the three or so Catholics they found in the party, they slaughtered over 300 of the Frenchmen, not because they were French, but because they weren't Catholic. They did not impose this policy on non-immigrants, the native Indians. Whether Trump proposes to persecute Muslim American citizens, native-born and otherwise, is not clear at this moment, but if he did, such actions would not be without precedent in America.

Not much later, in 1636, the authorities in the Massachusetts Bay Colony found English immigrant Roger Williams guilty of spreading thoughts that threatened the colony's officially established religion, and they banished Williams—religious-immigration policy was already softening, at least by comparison with the Spaniards' standards of the century previous. Williams "fled" the colony to a place just outside the boundaries of its charter, present-day Providence, Rhode Island, and established his own settlement where he intended to practice "religious freedom," presumably extending to the immigration policies (if any) he practiced in his settlement. I have found no record of religious discrimination in the immigration practices of Providence Plantations, as Williams's new domain became known, nor have I noted challenges to it from outside the ambit of Protestant Christianity (though Catholics have since become numerous in the area).

An entity recognizable as the precursor of today's government of the United States came into being sometime between 1776 and 1783. Histories of this entity's immigration policies, and practices (which occasionally departed from the policies) abound, and are well documented, but include little that runs along the lines of religious discrimination embodied therein. Roger Williams's (and others') notions of "religious freedom" became enshrined in the constitution not only of the United States, but in the constitutions of many of the individual states. To this day, it appears that no state of the United States has, for example, any official religion, though the circumstances under which the Province of Maryland was established suggest that, like Israel for Jews, Maryland was at least to be a haven for English and perhaps other Catholics (Maryland's original and present laws, like Israel's, proclaim tolerance for all religions). If any US state were to proclaim an official religion (say, Mormonism in Utah), such an act would undoubtedly be struck down smartly as unconstitutional.



Immigrants lined up waiting for the medical examination. Date 1912

Source: Popular Science Monthly No. 80 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

One reason religious discrimination in US immigration policy seems so fleeting in accounts of its history is that discrimination is interpreted only in its prohibitive meaning, rather than encompassing its converse, that is, *preference* for persons of some religion or other. Again, the operation of any such discrimination (broadly interpreted, as stated) must be explored in terms of effects and results, not merely in terms of the letters of published policies.

On this score, the immigration to the US of several million Jews of various nationalities over at least the century preceding 1989 invites scrutiny as to whether *effective* US immigration policy might have discriminated in favor of that religion (Judaism).

A famous case where that hypothesis might be falsified occurred in 1939, when the German ocean Liner *City of Saint Louis* was denied permission in Cuba, the United States and Canada to disembark some 908 German Jews seeking to leave Nazi Germany. US immigration policy, operating as it has (pre-Trump) only on nationalities rather than religion, is nothing if not patchy, depending not only on various points of official discretion but further on national (political) sentiment. The *Saint Louis* affair is one that has become a byword to those promoting a view of German official anti-Semitism as genocide, despite the survival of at least 75 percent of the passengers on the “voyage of the damned.”

But the *Saint Louis* may be seen to be the exception that proves the rule, at least subsequent to the 1924 enactment of the Immigration Act, which effectively throttled immigration from pretty much everywhere, particularly as a matter of popular sentiment. Sentiment of people then living in the US was rather broadly slanted in opposition to immigrants from everywhere, rather than specifically against the immigration of Jews.

Or not. Immigration in the fifty or so years before 1924 contained a notable (but not officially visible) percentage of people from numerous other countries who were, nonetheless ... Jews. In a later day, as will be shown, such people might have managed to get themselves classified (and admitted) as

“refugees,” but in the times (say, 1874 to 1924), they were just immigrants from “Poland,” “Russia,” “Austria-Hungary” or whatever sovereign entities that then asserted credible claims to the territories they came from. The reason the percentage of these people who were Jews was “not visible” as such is elucidated by none other than Henry Ford, in his thoroughly reviled series of articles in the *Dearborn Independent* of 1920-1921. In this series, he details how, as he says, the US government was dissuaded, around 1900, from identifying the race or nationality of census respondents as “Jewish” by what Ford called the “Jewish lobby.”¹ The same interests succeeded in preventing any such official identification of persons then and thereafter entering the United States as immigrants. The religion of the statistical subjects was, of course, not collected by the government.

It is, of course, a daunting challenge to tease out the separate effects of immigration policy on the one hand, and the propensity, from time to time, of different religious groups to immigrate of their own accord. Much immigration from Europe to today’s United States was in fact inspired by religious persecution at home by, first, the martyred Huguenots of Fort Caroline, then the Puritans who expelled Roger Williams from Massachusetts, and then, perhaps, the Jews in numbers dwarfing the two groups mentioned previously added together. The redoubtable Henry Ford, perhaps here straining credulity, identifies the heavy influx of Jews into the US around the turn of the last century as a deliberate plot on the part of Jewish global overlords to move (most of) the Jews of Poland and Russia to the United States for the purpose of taking over the US in a manner he alleges as resembling their then-recent takeover of Russia.² Then again, subsequent (successful) agitation on the part of agents of Israel in countries of North Africa and the Middle East to motivate Jewish emigration to Israel over the past fifty years might provide support for such notions that was not available to Ford in 1920.

In more recent years, in fact, Israel and the US came into a glancing conflict over emigres from the Soviet Union, the (intended) result of the strident “Free Soviet Jewry” campaign of the 1970s-80s in the US and elsewhere. In response, presumably, to political pressure from American Jews, the US extended the coveted “refugee” status to Jews applying for admission to the US as immigrants from the Soviet Union. This conferring of refugee status (on the score, note, of *religious* persecution, or *was* it racial?) amounted to discrimination, of the favoritistic type, toward Jews from the Soviet Union.

By 1989, Israel, noting this growing tide of emigrants, decided it would prefer to have more Jews in Israel over having more Jews (hopefully advocating for Israel) in its great [American milch cow](#), and arranged with said milch cow to have this preferment lifted from selected emigrants from the Soviet Union, leaving said emigrants with only [one country](#) to emigrate to, and that one a most-willing recipient of them, however otherwise-spare its attractions might be. Over time, Israel seems to have gained about a million (Russian-speaking) Jews, while the US gained at least a comparable number of the same sort.

So, the conferment and disconferment of refugee status lays a pattern of religious discrimination over the policies by which the US government decides who may immigrate and who may not.

So long as the voters of the United States relegate matters such as immigration policy to “their” government, Trump’s program of religious discrimination rests on a very firm basis.

Notes:

1 *The Dearborn Independent*, "How Jews in the US Conceal Their Strength," October 9, 1920.

2 *Ibid.*

Author(s) :	Jett Rucker
Title:	Discrimination by Religion in Immigration to the US
Sources:	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , 8(3) 2016
Dates:	published: 2016-09-05, first posted: 2016-11-30 12:25:39

<http://inconvenienthistory.com/8/3/4168>